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Power for the Powerless : Oirot/ Amursana Prophecy in Altai and Western Mongolia, 1890s-1920s

Andrei A. Znamenski

1 In 1904, in the Mountain Altai, the humble shepherd Chet Chelpan stirred up thousands of local nomads, announcing the advent of the glorious redeemer prince Oirot – the personification of the Oirot (Jungaria) state, which in the 17th century included Altai, Western Mongolia and Western China, and then under Chinese assaults perished from the face of the earth in the next century. The Altaians came to believe that the legendary savior would deliver them from the increasing land and cultural pressure by the Russians and would bring back the golden time of Oirot. Seven years later, in Western Mongolia, the assertive and ruthless Ja-Lama, a former lama apprentice, equally agitated local nomads by declaring that he was the reincarnation of the last Oirot ruler named Amursana, who now returned to liberate his people from Chinese domination and to revive the golden Oirot state. The first episode, along with subsequent events that led to the formation of the ethno-religious movement Ak-Jang (White or Pure Faith), was widely covered in contemporary Russian media and became the subject of numerous specialized works. This literature ranges from contemporary writings by Siberian autonomists and Soviet anthropologists to present-day Russian and Western scholars, who usually call this movement Burkhanism, after Burkhan (the image of Buddha) – one of the chief deities in the White Faith. In contrast, the ethno-religious movement that was stirred up in Western Mongolia by the same prophecy drew little attention of scholars. In many respects, this should be ascribed to the personality of Ja-Lama, a mysterious half-lama and half-bandit man from nowhere, who was immortalized as “lama avenger” by Ferdinand Ossendowski in his *Beasts, Men and Gods* (Ossendowski 1922, pp. 113-121). Moreover, the students of Altai and Mongolia did not link millenarian prophecies that were simultaneously on the rise both in Western Mongolia and Altai.

2 The scholars, who have studied the Altaian White Faith (Potapov 1953 ; Sagalaev 1992 ; Sherstova 1997 ; Znamenski 1999, 2005), have until recently viewed this movement as the

product of purely local Altaian religious thought, with only minor cultural drops from Buddhism and Christianity, downplaying or not paying too much attention to strong Tibetan Buddhist connections. Analyzing why and how it happened, V.K. Kos'min (2007) correctly points out that this scholarly tradition goes back to the stance taken by Dmitri Klementz, a former populist revolutionary-turned ethnographer during his Siberian exile, and later one of the defense experts for Chet Chelpan, when the latter was put on trial by Russian authorities. Klementz successfully exonerated the preachers of the White Faith, who were vilified by their competitors, Russian Orthodox missionaries, for their "subversive" Lamaist links. Driven by high moral considerations, Klementz used evidence selectively to present Ak-Jang as a pure indigenous and noble movement that had nothing to do with Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, the ethnographer-revolutionary stressed that, rather than being penalized, the members of the White Faith should be commended for moving away from crude and dark shamanism and gravitating toward noble monotheism. On the contrary, in the 1930s, using available evidence about Buddhist links in the White Faith, Soviet anthropology stamped the movement as bourgeois nationalism, a fifth column of Japanese imperialism.

3 Vera D'iakonova and Kos'min became the first to give an unbiased look at abundant evidence about Buddhist influences in the White Faith. Kos'min concluded that the roots of Ak-Jang should be sought in neighboring Mongolia. Moreover, D'iakonova has not even used such expressions as the White Faith or Burkhanism and prefers to refer to it as Altaian Buddhism (Kos'min 2007, p. 45 ; D'iakonova 2001). Still, bringing to light this necessary corrective in our view of Ak-Jang, they have not extended their discussion to showing that Ak-Jang was in fact part of a broader millenarian movement that sprang up in the Mongol-Turkic nomadic world in the early 20th century in response to Russian and Chinese advances and social turmoil caused by revolutionary changes in Eurasia.

4 In this paper I want to point out that the two seemingly unrelated episodes mentioned in the beginning were in fact genetically linked to each other. I argue that what happened in Altai in 1904 and then in Western Mongolia in 1911 were two landmark events that were incited by the same millenarian Oirot/Amursana prophecy shared by the nomads of Altai and Western Mongolia. I suggest that Chet Chelpan and Ja-Lama were the two most noticeable representatives of the motley crowd of "prophets" who wandered the Altaian Mountains and Mongol steppes between the 1890s and the 1920s, and propagated the advent of Oirot or Amursana, dwelling on Mongol Buddhist tradition, epic storytelling, and shared folk memory of the Oirot state. The Mongols, and some Altaians who lived nearby, called him Amursana. At the same time, the majority of Altaian nomads referred to him as Oirot and talked about Amursana as his chief lieutenant.[1] Whatever his name, this redeemer was said to have returned after hiding for 120 years, and now, in charge of a mighty army, he would take revenge on enemies and bring together his Oirot people.

5 It is suggested that the millenarian dreams of the Altaian and Western Mongols, which lingered on since the demise of the Oirot state, dramatically escalated by the early 20th century in response to the massive Russian and Chinese economic/cultural assault on the nomadic world and a subsequent chaos caused by the collapse of the two empires. I also argue that both in Altai and Western Mongolia, the millenarian sentiments served the goals of emerging nationalism. Last but not least, my paper explores the appropriation of the Oirot/Amursana prophecy by the early Bolsheviks and their Red Mongol fellow travelers, who were able to mute and eventually phase out Altaian and Mongolian millenarianism by linking it to secular Communist prophecy.

Oirot/Amursana legends in Altai and Western Mongolia

6 Both Oirot and Amursana were personifications of the glorious Oirot (Jungar) nomadic confederation (named after the ruling Oirot clan), which in the 1600s united Turkic- and Mongol-speaking nomads of Inner Asia, who were conquered by the Oirot. Assertive Oirot princes embraced Tibetan Buddhism and frequently acted as patrons of Dalai Lamas ; they also constantly challenged the Manchu Empire. The legendary Amursana was a reference to a real historical character, prince Amursana (1722–1757), who unsuccessfully attempted to put himself in charge of Jungaria. The Oirot, or Jungar, state was a loose nomadic confederation that united what today is represented by southern Altai, Western Mongolia and Western China (Sinkiang). Amursana was a minor prince who participated in a ruinous succession struggle for power after Galdan-Tseren, the charismatic khan of the Oirot Empire, deceased in 1745. Amursana at first supported Davatsi, one of the powerful princes, and helped him to become the khan of the Oirot state. Yet later, the two partners began to quarrel, and their conflict escalated in an armed struggle, which prompted Amursana to turn to China and seek the Manchu support against his rival.

7 The Manchu were eager to eliminate the powerful and independent nomadic empire that was a constant threat to their western borderlands and gladly provided such assistance. They sent against the Oirot a powerful army with Amursana in charge of the vanguard of these troops. After Jungaria was occupied, Amursana began to act as an independent leader, which aroused the suspicions of the Manchu. In the meantime, the population of the nomadic empire rose up in a spontaneous revolt against the depredations of the Chinese troops.

8 The wayward prince, who fell out of favor with the Manchu, now turned against them, casting his lot with the popular movement against the invaders. Fighting a losing battle against his former patrons, in 1757, Amursana escaped to Russia, where he soon caught the plague and died in Siberia. Trying to bring the Oirot state down and phase it out as a potential threat, the Manchu unleashed a genocidal warfare against its entire population, eliminating men, women and children. With 80 % of its population annihilated, Jungaria literally ceased to exist – an act of the most horrendous genocide in the 18th century. In fear, few remaining bands of nomads scattered around. Many of them escaped to the west to the Kazakh plains, and to the north to the mountains of Altai and the Tuva taiga forest. These bands later gave rise to the modern-day Altaians, Tuvans, and western Mongols. Several bands of survivors hanging in the vicinity of Russian borderland forts asked to be admitted as subjects of the Russian empress Elizabeth. The “maiden khan” (*baala* or *paala* khan), as the Altaians called her, granted such permission. At the same time, when things settled down and warfare subsided, some of these nomads continued to wander between Mongolia (a Manchu possession), and Altai (a Russian possession), and eventually ended up as people with a peculiar status of double tribute payers (*dvoedantsy*), paying allegiance and tribute both to the Russian and Manchu empires.

9 These bands began to refer to themselves as Oirot-*kizhi* (Oirot people). In Russian sources, the “double tribute payers” and other Turkic-speaking nomads of southern Altai were called “mountain Kalmyk,” “border Kalmyk,” or “white Kalmyk” in contrast to the “black Kalmyk”—the Mongolian-speaking population of Western Mongolia. In fact, being a part

of the former Oirot state, the Western Mongols developed a separate identity from their Eastern brethren (Khalkha). Before Mongolia gained her sovereignty from China in 1912, when Eastern and Western parts were brought together, the Western area of the country was not even considered the part of Mongolia proper. On all maps it was labeled as Hovd frontier, and the power of Bogdo-gegen, the head of Mongol Buddhists, never extended into this area (Kaplonski 1998 : 43-44).

10 The horrors of the war and the genocide inflicted on the Oirot people along with the sudden disappearance of prince Amursana in the faraway northern country left deep imprints in the folk memory, which later sparked tales about the prince's subsequent return to his former subjects to deliver them from the Chinese and the Russians. Finding themselves powerless and at the mercy of two mighty empires, the Oirot people spiritually empowered themselves through this lingering prophecy. The folk memory, which is always selective, chose the second nobler part of Amursana's life for celebration and glorification. In Western Mongolia, lamas, who had a rich tradition of assimilating local historical characters and epic heroes into the Buddhist pantheon, declared Amursana a manifestation of the wrathful Mahakala, one of protectors of the Buddhist faith. Eventually, popular tales whitewashed the legacy of Jungaria to such an extent that it began to shine in folk memory as the golden time of Oirot.

11 There were many versions of the Oirot/Amursana legend in Altai and Mongolia. One of the popular versions in Altai went as follows : There was prince Oirot who ruled Altai. He defended everybody, and there were neither poor nor discontented people in his domain. Then the Oirot people became surrounded by enemies who destroyed this idyllic life (a clear reference to the genocide of the Oirot by the Manchu/Chinese). Unable to protect his own people, Oirot retreated to Russia, where he began living with the *maiden-khan* (Russian empress). Before his departure, Oirot did two things : he cut his horse's tail to the root, and he also cut down a larch tree to the level of his stirrups. Then the prince declared that he would come back only when his horse's tail grew again and only when the larch tree grew so big that it would cover a whole army with its leaves ; in other versions, Oirot predicts that he would come back in 120 years. It was also sometimes stressed that the news about his return would be announced by a twelve-year-old girl and marked by the shifting of a glacier on the highest Altai Mountain.

12 Similar prophecies, only about Amursana, circulated in western Mongolia. One of them was recorded by the Russian folklore scholar Boris Vladimirtsov, a prominent student of the Mongols, during his trip to Western Mongolia in 1913 (Vladimirtsov 2002, pp. 275-276). According to the Vladimirtsov version, when the powerful khan of the Oirot state, Galdan-Tseren, was killed during a domestic war in the "Great Nomadic Encampments" – a reference to Jungaria – his pregnant wife was taken by one of the victorious princes as his own wife. Soon she gave birth to a boy who was holding in one fist a dry blood clot and in his other fist a black stone ; a dry blood clot being held in the fist of a newborn was a sign that the child was destined to become a great leader. When the boy Amursana turned three, his mother went to visit relatives to perform a naming ceremony for him. His maternal uncle announced that the boy was a reincarnation of Mahakala and his name would be Amursana (Quiet Thought), and that he would ride a horse named Maralbasi (literally the head of a stag).

13 Later, when Amursana grew up, he left Jungaria and became a subject of the Manchu who appointed him commander of the left flank of the Chinese army. Yet, slandered by his personal enemies, Amursana fell out of favor with the Chinese. Amursana was so upset

that he took an oath, "I will return in 120 years and will take revenge and will gather my people Derben-Oirot." Thus, he left for Russia and began to live with the *maiden-khan* (Russian empress). In a year, the "maiden khan" gave birth to a son who was named Temursana (Iron Thought). Amursana found out that the Russians were not happy with this union. He wanted to take his son and leave, but the *maiden-khan* (Russian empress) told him : "I have five lands, whose nomadic encampments are located close to a great sea. Take these people and rule them." Thus, she sent Amursana to rule these nomadic habitats and he lived happily thereafter." The legend prophesized that ten years before Amursana came back, a fresh spring would burst from the ravine named Burgudtei (the place Amursana went through during his flee to Russia) and fresh grass and young trees would sprout all around. Then, four years before his return, from the north, a light brown horse with black mane and tail would come galloping with a saddle on its back. It would cross the mountain passage in the Burgudtei area and would gallop around and then disappear. These were two signs by which people of the Oirot state would find out that Amursana was coming back.

14 In an Oirot legend recorded by ethnomusicologist Andrei Anokhin (1919) approximately at the same time in Central Altai (Chemal village) we see some parallels with the Vladimirtsov version. Although, instead of one Amursana character as in Vladimirtsov's version, in the Anokhin version we have two protagonists (Oirot khan and mighty warrior Amursana), the themes are essentially the same : a newborn baby Amursana holding in one fist a black stone and in his other fist a dry blood clot, internal squabbles in Jungaria which upset the Oirot prince and prompted him to leave ("why should I fight my own people ? It will be better if I leave for another country. Let others rule my people if they are not happy with me."), an unsuccessful attempt of Oirot to strike a union with the Manchu, then an escape to the Russian land of *maiden-khan* (Russian empress), and an eventual break-up with the empress who wanted Oirot to remain at her court.

15 Interestingly, this particular version of the legend does not exactly fit the major body of Oirot/Amursana tales which glorify and celebrate the mighty redeemer. The Anokhin version portrays Oirot khan in an ambivalent manner, which might show that, despite general idealization of the golden time of Oirot, the folk memory did refer to the wavering role of historical Amursana and point to the precarious status of the Turkic-speaking people in the former Oirot state that had conquered these tribes and turned them into tribute-payers.

16 In the Anokhin version of the tale, Oirot at first acts arrogantly, neglecting advice of the supreme God Kudai who instructs him to pray before battling Erlik, the master of the Underworld in Altai mythology. For this, Oirot pays dearly. Not only does Erlik escape undefeated, he also sends all kinds of misfortunes on the Oirot kingdom, including evil spirits planted in the bodies of livestock. Trying to eradicate spirits, Oirot butchers all his livestock and leaves his subjects hungry and miserable. This particular episode might be a legendary illusion to the self-destructive behavior of the last Oirot princes who invited the Chinese invasion by their rivalries. Oirot subjects begin to wonder what is going on : "Our khan completely lost his mind. All our stock is gone. He made himself and us poor." Moreover, Oirot mistreats young Amursana – an offspring of a brief union between an Oirot sister and a stray dog sent by Erlik. Before coming to terms with the youth, who awes surrounding people with his superhuman power, Oirot torments Amursana, literally treating him as a dog ; the khan throws him in a deep pit and plants a dog's shoulder

blade in his body. Eventually Oirot feels ashamed and elevates Amursana to his chief lieutenant who helps him to overcome enemies.

Prophecy Unbound : Russian and Chinese Advances, Collapse of Empires, and Emerging Nationalism

17 Both within the Chinese and Russian empires, Turkic – and Mongol – speaking nomads, many of whom were Tibetan Buddhists, enjoyed considerable self-rule, being treated as subject tributary areas. As long as they recognized themselves as subjects of their respective empires and agreed to perform a few services (usually protecting the frontiers and paying tribute), they were left alone. Moreover, in China, the Manchu Dynasty, following the old tactics of divide and rule, went further, segregating Tibetan Buddhist people from the rest of the populations, and Chinese peasants were forbidden to settle in Tibet and Mongolia. In Russia, the subject tributary status of the Siberian natives and their self-rule were confirmed in the 1822 Statute of Alien Administration. As far as Altai was concerned, Russian authorities set aside for the local nomads a loosely defined territory of about 77, 000 square miles, which was defined as the "Kalmyk encampments." Russian authorities rarely interfered in the internal life of these encampments, restricting their relations mostly to the collection of tribute that native chieftains (*zaisans*) themselves delivered to collection points.

18 At the end of the 19th century, both in Russian and Chinese Empires, everything changed. Famine and population pressure in China put an end to no-settlement policies. In Inner Mongolia, the Chinese began to gradually squeeze out nomads from their pastures and curtail their traditional law. By the beginning of the 20th century, southern (Inner) Mongolia was flooded with settlers, and, simultaneously, Mongol officials were replaced with Chinese mandarins. In the meantime, between the 1880s and 1910s, after serfdom in Russia was abolished, hundreds of thousands of settlers flocked to southern Siberia in search of good pasture and plow lands. Although Siberia was large enough to absorb many of these newcomers, in Altai and the Trans-Baikal – the most lucrative settlement areas – Russian newcomers began to clash with local populations over land. Between 1896 and 1916, to speed up colonization and link the eastern borderlands to the rest of the country, the Russian government built the Trans-Siberian railroad. To the dismay of indigenous people of southern Siberia, the Russian Empire, like its Manchu counterpart, pushed to replace their traditional self-rule and law with standard imperial laws and administration. Fearful that the Russians would roll southward into Mongolia and on to the Far East, the Chinese doubled their colonization moves, expanding to Manchuria and further into Inner Mongolia, where the number of Mongols soon shrank to 33 percent (Kalinnikov 1928, p. 39). Replicating Russian steps in Siberia, in 1906, the Chinese government built a railroad to Inner Mongolia, drawing this borderland area closer to Beijing. Thus, the centuries-old policy of noninterference was shredded to pieces. From then on there would be no peace between the Mongols and the Chinese. As one historian of the period wrote, the entire Mongol history in the first half of the 20th century became saturated with anti-Chinese sentiments.

19 The turmoil caused by the First Russian Revolution of 1905, the subsequent power vacuum that followed the collapse of the Chinese (1911) and Russian (1917) empires, and civil war chaos that reigned over northern Eurasia turned the whole world of the Altaians

and Mongols upside down, which added more fuel to their traditional prophetic expectation. Amid this chaos accompanied by rising millenarian hopes, people of the Mongol-Tibetan world (Kalmyk, Buryat, Altaians, Mongols, Tuvans, and Tibetans) began to take power in their own hands and shape themselves into nationalities and nations. Drawing on folk memory of the Oirot state and epic storytelling, several assertive leaders in southern Siberia and Mongolia began promoting grand political schemes that went beyond the existing cultural and geographical boundaries. Brought into the spotlight by a whirlwind of revolutionary changes, some of these redeemers peddled projects of bringing nomads of Altai, Western Mongolia, and Western China together into the revived 17th-century Oirot confederation. Others wanted to build up a pan-Mongol state that would unite people of the "Mongol stock" in Siberia, Mongolia, and Manchuria. This was the background against which the Oirot/Amursana prophecy fired up in the hearts of Altaian and Mongol nomads.[2]

20 As was mentioned, in Altai, the ethno-religious movement sparked by the Oirot legend, was inaugurated in 1904 by Chet Chelpan (Figure 1) and Chugul Sorokova, his twelve-year-old adopted daughter. Both claimed to have seen the messenger of the legendary prince, who confided to them that Oirot would soon drive all Russians from Altai and restore the old way of life. In excitement, the nomads who shared the vision of Chet Chelpan sang :

> If one shoots six bows,
> The whole Altai will be on fire.
> When golden Oirot comes,
> Russia will be gone.
> (Tanashev 1929, p. 228).

Fig. 1. Chet Chelpan, the messenger of the Oirot prophecy who laid the foundation for the Ak-Jang faith

Andrei Anokhin Papers, Archive of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg (AMAE), f. 11, op. 1, d. 120.

21 Chet Chelpan also prophesied that Oirot was sent by Burkhan (the image of Buddha), the spirit of Altai, which eventually evolved into one of the major deities of the White Faith. In the meantime, Chet instructed his flock, the Oirot people were to reject all contacts with the Russians, destroy Russian money, and stop using Russian tools. This was the birth of the Ak-Jang (white or pure faith) that drew on elements of Tibetan Buddhism, indigenous shamanism, epic tales, and memories of the Oirot confederation. Behind Chet and his daughter stood a group of indigenous activists headed by brothers Argymai and Manji Kul'djin and Tyry Akemchi (White Healer) (Figure 2), who had apprenticed in Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia where they picked up elements of Buddhism and brought them to Altai.

Fig. 2. Tyry Akemchi (White Healer) during his prayer. This prominent spearhead of Ak-Jang (White Faith) aspired to unify it along Mongol Buddhism

Pencil drawing by Kondratii Tanashev, another White Faith preacher [1928]. Andrei Danilin Papers, AMAE, f. 15, op. 1, 54.

22 The legends about Oirot/Amursana, which were familiar to all people of Altai and western Mongolia, helped override clan and territorial differences and merge the nomads into nationalities. Probably unaware of this himself, the good shepherd Chet Chelpan sent to his nomadic brethren a powerful nationalist message, asking his flock to forget all quarrels and live "like children of one father" and "like the herd headed by one stallion." The preachers (*yarlikchi*) (Figure 3) of the new faith picked up this message and began to sign psalms, glorifying "white Altai" and "golden Altai," the motherland of one nation :

> The people with the same thoughts,
> Eagerly pray to White Altai,
> Honest native [root] people
> Have one thought and one life
> (Tanashev 1928-1929, p. 140).

Fig. 3. Jaily Mundusov, an Ak-Jang (White Faith) preacher [1928]

Andrei Danilin Papers, AMAE, f. 15, op. 1, 14.

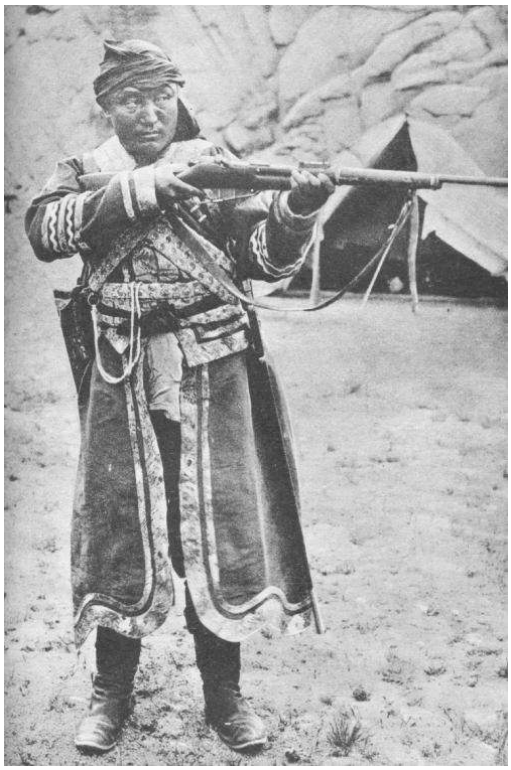
23 The future Oirot utopia was envisioned as a peaceable and abundant nomadic paradise devoid of any vestiges of alien culture such as Russian wooden houses, mines, telegraph, and railroads. This would be the land of eternal summer and spring, where the livestock would always have enough grass to graze and where people would live up to 300 years. Money as well as theft and fraud would be gone, and people would be ruled by old chieftains (*zaisans)* and pay their tribute in furs rather than in money.[3] The former old Mongolian way of reading and writing would return and "the language will be the former, old one." (Bat'ianova 2006-2007, p. 23).

24 After 1917, when the Russian Empire collapsed and indigenous periphery in Siberia was for a while on its own, the Altaian landscape painter and folklore collector Grigory Gurkin, along with several native intellectuals and members of the White Faith, worked to convert this potent prophecy into Altaian nationhood. Assisted by Russian anthropologist and Siberian autonomist Vasilii Anuchin, Gurkin launched the Karakorum state (a reference to the legendary capital of the Genghis Khan's empire). Riding the Oirot prophecy, they declared autonomy of the Mountain Altai and began to contemplate a "Republic of the Oirot," which was to revive the 17th-century Oirot confederation by uniting Turkic- and Mongol-speaking nomads of Altai, Tuva and western Mongolia. Caught in the crossfire of the Russian Civil War, the short-lived Karakorum autonomy was soon demised under White and Red attacks (Znamenski 2005, pp. 44-46).

25 In the meantime, in neighboring Western Mongolia, another spiritual celebrity rose in power and captivated the minds of local nomads. Ja-Lama (Figure 4), a notorious Kalmyk expatriate from the Volga River area – who at first claimed that he was a grandson of Amursana and then declared himself his reincarnation – was rallying the disgruntled

Mongols, who wanted to free themselves from the Chinese and were ready to accept the legendary redeemer.[4] Ja-Lama showed up at the right place and right time. Like nomads of Altai, people in Western Mongolia were already scanning the horizon for someone with marks of Amursana and Oirot, who would come from the north and rescue them from the Chinese. Vladimirtsov, who visited Western Mongolia in 1913 and recorded a few versions of the Amursana legend, directly stressed that Chinese domination and the loss of land stimulated the Mongols to search for signs of the legendary redeemer (Vladimirtsov 2002, p. 276).

Fig. 4. Ja-Lama, a Kalmyk expatriate who declared himself the reincarnation of Amursana in Western Mongolia



Photography by Hermann Consten, c. 1912-1913. Hermann Consten, *Weiderpltze der Mongolen im Reiche der Chalcha* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1920), vol. 2, plate 49.

26 Ja-Lama was a shady character with a murky biography, who apprenticed for a short while in a Buddhist monastery. His first attempt to plug himself into the Amursana prophecy took place as early as the 1890s, when he wandered into western Mongolia and declared himself the grandson of the prince. Although many nomads followed him, the situation was not yet right. At that time, Chinese authorities quickly apprehended him and Ja-Lama had to flee southward to Tibet. In 1911, when Chinese Empire collapsed, he returned, riding the blossoming millenarian dream and nationalist feelings of Mongols. In his *Beasts, Men and Gods*, Russian-Polish writer Ossendowski correctly described Ja-Lama as an ardent nationalist who worked to bring the various tribes of western Mongolia together into a nation. Taking full advantage of the Mongols' dislike of the Chinese, Ja-Lama invoked "blood and soil" sentiments among his followers. His major coup was the successful seizure of Kobdo, the only major battle during the Mongols' liberation movement in 1911–13 (Figures 5 & 6). Before storming the town, Ja-Lama blessed his nomadic warriors with words that appealed to their nationalistic sentiments : "You must

not fear death and must not retreat. You are fighting and dying for Mongolia, for which the gods have appointed a great destiny. See what the fate of Mongolia will be !" (Ossendowski, p. 119).

Fig. 5. Mongol warriors during the liberation war against the Chinese

Photography by Hermann Consten, c. 1912-1913. Hermann Consten, *Weiderpltze der Mongolen im Reiche der Chalcha* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1920), vol. 2, plate 54.

Fig. 6. A Mongol commander during the liberation war against the Chinese

Photography by Hermann Consten, c. 1912-1913. Hermann Consten, *Weiderpltze der Mongolen im Reiche der Chalcha* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1920), vol. 1, plate 47.

27 The deeds of the "lama avenger" were immortalized in a 1913 poem written by Parchen, a Mongol epic singer who composed the following song after the Kobdo victory :

> The end of the Manchu, the kingdom that ruled
> The Western part of the precious mountain Sumer.
> In the mighty kingdom, in which the holy Bogdo-gegen now rules,
> The faith of Buddha spread around,
> The bliss without obstacles,
> And people became happy,
> And all their dreams came true.
> And now, on the twentieth of the second moon of the Bogdo-gegen rule,
> Two lamas came on two ironclad camels,
> With rifles behind their backs and with Mauser pistols stuck into their belts.
> They look like mighty warriors,
> They carry the power of black Mahakala.
> One of them announced :
> "I am a pilgrim from the land of mighty warrior, maiden khan.
> By origin, I belong to the great Mongols,
> I lived in the Volga river land.
> My water source is the Irtysh River,
> I have many mighty warriors,
> I have many riches.
> Now I came to meet you, my poor Oirot people.
> At this hour when the final battle is fought,
> Will we shatter the enemy ?
> Will you stay together ?
> My motherland is Altai, Irtysh, Khobuk-sairi, Emil, Boro-tala, Ili, and Alatau.
> All these lands are one Oirot motherland.
> I am a grandson of Amursana,
> The one who is the reincarnation of Mahakala and who rode the horse Maralbashi.
> I am the one who is called Dambei-djantsan [Ja-Lama]
> I ride to the heart of my motherland,
> Where I want to wander freely.
> I ride to gather my subjects in order to live happily"
> (Vladimirtsov 2002, p. 279).

28 Ja-Lama embarked on building his own fiefdom, where he began to rule as a dictator. Near the monastery of Munjok-kurel, "Amursana" erected a tent town populated by lamas and regular shepherds. Yurts were pitched in strict geometrical lines in straight rows rather than chaotically as the Mongols normally did. The reincarnation demanded complete obedience and enforced a strict religious discipline, humiliating and punishing lamas who dared to drink or smoke, which was against traditional Tibetan Buddhism. Those who broke the code of faith were forced to get married and were turned into soldiers. Ja-Lama announced that in his new-era state, there would be "few lamas, but only good ones." The rest of the clergy had to become productive laborers. In his tent town, all people, both clergy and laypeople, were subjected to regular physical labor (Consten 1920, 2, pp. 229-231 ; Lomakina 2004, pp. 127, 130).

29 Like his counterparts in Altai, the reincarnated Amursana nourished a great plan to unite all nomads of Altai and Western parts of China and Mongolia into a large state - another attempt to revive the great Oirot confederation in its 17th-century borders. These ambitions seriously disturbed the Bogdo-gegen and his court who were afraid that the reincarnated redeemer might widen traditional differences between eastern (Khalkha) and western (Oirot) Mongols and eventually split the country in two. In 1914, following

up on these fears and using Ja-Lama's brutalities as an excuse, the Bogdo-gegen solicited the assistance of a Russian consul to apprehend the "lama avenger," who formally remained a Russian subject. Ambushed and arrested by a platoon of Cossacks, Ja-Lama had to spend several years in exile in northeastern Siberia. Yet this was not the end of the lama with a gun. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Ja-Lama would return to his flock.

30 The appearance of the new reincarnation of Amursana in Mongolia boosted prophetic sentiments in neighboring Altai. Altaian proponents of the White Faith even sent a special delegation to visit Ja-Lama in Mongolia. Having learned that "Amursana" donned a yellow robe, one of the White Faith preachers named Sume Kazyndaev made for himself a yellow robe, which he wore while travelling over nomadic encampments of southern Altai and spreading word that Amursana appeared in Mongolia and soon would come to Altai (Khabarov 1914, p. 32). The arrest of the reincarnated prince did not shatter faith in the prophecy, neither in Western Mongolia nor in Altai. In the summer of 1915, a year after Ja-Lama was detained, in various parts of Western Mongolia, several other individuals emerged, claiming the Amursana lineage. All of them except one were apprehended by Mongol authorities. The most resilient "Amursana" was a lama named Tsagan-Golyn who received wide support of the nomadic populace and was able to defy the Bogdo-gegen authority, which again required the interference of a detachment of a Russian Cossack platoon to apprehend the culprit (Lomakina 1993, p. 126).

31 When Ja-Lama was being transported through southern Siberia to a Tomsk city prison, the Altaian enthusiasts of the Mongol reincarnation insisted that it was a regular person and not actually Ja-Lama who was traveling in the prison wagon. They argued that the real Amursana would not allow himself to be carried in such an undignified manner. If he had decided to travel, he would have used a railroad. The real Amursana, insisted the Altaians, "flew" to Mongolia where he was hiding invisible to his enemies. Despite all attempts of Russian missionaries to deconstruct the Mongolian messiah (by explaining to nomads that Ja-Lama was a cruel Kalmyk from an Astrakhan town on the Volga River who skinned people and who exploited Mongol and Altaian legend about Oirot/Amursana and who was finally confined to a prison), the natives did not want to believe the Christian preachers (Khabarov 1914, p. 32back).

32 Georgy Apanaev, a Russian missionary to the Altaians, optimistically viewed the arrest of Ja-Lama as a devastating blow to the whole prophecy and predicted, "If the government does not allow this false teacher Ja-Lama to come back, all supporters of the White Faith will drop out except for a few of the more stubborn ones [...] Our Lord is mighty and all powerful. He punished this arrogant false prophet and brought him down in front of the followers of his teaching. Now they have nobody to guide them. And all supporters of the imposter are presently confused, seeing the destruction of the false prophet Ja-Lama" (Apanaev 1914, p. 3). Yet his optimism was premature. As powerful as it could be, it was not the radiant and assertive personality of Ja-Lama, but the spiritual sentiments of the people that allowed the prophecy to live on. Moreover, the reverential attitude of the Altaians to Ja-Lama was simply a continuation of a long-established cultural tradition to look to Mongolia for spiritual feedback. In fact, millenarian expectations were steadily on the rise both in Western Mongolia and Altai since the 1880s.

33 From the demise of the Oirot state in the 1750s to the 1920s, there was an ongoing traffic of ideas between both areas, formerly parts of the 17th century nomadic empire. The Mongol influence was especially noticeable in southern Altai, which was populated by former double subjects of Chinese and Russian empires. As early as the 20th century, many

Altaians still spoke Mongol and some of them were even able to read Mongol books in old Oirot language. Visiting lamas and tantric healers from Mongolia were a routine part of the Altaian spiritual landscape. They healed local natives, performed fortune-telling sessions, and exposed people to Buddhism (Altai Orthodox Mission 1886, p. 25). From time to time, these visiting dignitaries shared with people the lingering prophecy about the coming of the legendary redeemer. Not a small thing in keeping this millenarian dream alive was the activities of indigenous Altaian epic storytellers (*kaichi*).

34 For example, as early as 1885, as Russian missionaries reported, from "Chinese possessions" (Mongolia) lama gegen (reincarnated one) came to Kosh Agach in southern Altai to propagate to the local nomads the advent of Oirot khan. This particular lama named Lupsun Brinlai, a fundraiser for several Mongol monasteries, declared himself the messenger of Oirot, simultaneously announcing that the legendary hero would liberate the Altaians from the Russians. Brinlai instructed the local nomads to learn from the junior lama he brought with him and left to live there among the Altaians (Altai Orthodox Mission 1886, p. 25). Missionary records are peppered with similar stories.

35 It is notable that approximately at the same time, Western Mongolia saw similar types of prophets who spearheaded the Amursana prophecy. In fact, this millenarian dream agitated Mongol nomads to such an extent that they asked the visiting Russian geographer-explorer Alexei Pozdneev if by any chance he was a vanguard of the Amursana army that they expected to descend from the northern country to liberate them from the Chinese (Lattimore 1955, p. 57). The home-grown "oracle" Chet Chelpan and the expatriate "messiah" Ja-Lama clearly belonged to the group of "prophets" who wandered the Altai Mountains and the Mongol plains at the turn of the 20th century, announcing the advent of Oirot and Amursana. All of them built upon the shared Mongol-Turkic tradition of epic storytelling and popular Buddhism.

36 All major proselytizers of the White Faith visited Mongolia or apprenticed in Mongolian monasteries. Chet Chelpan and Akemchi, a prominent preacher of Tibetan Buddhism in Altai, lived and apprenticed with a lama in the Tsagan-nur Lake area in Mongolia, near the Russian border. Besides, Akemchi, a man of some education, spent much time in Eastern Mongolia on his own, working as an interpreter for a Russian diplomatic mission. Kondratii Tanashev, who was an active proponent of the White Faith at the turn of the 1920s, worked in Mongolia herding purchased livestock to Altai. So did the Kul'djin brothers who had vested economic interests in Mongolia trading Altaian furs for Mongol livestock.

37 Along with shamanic rituals and deities, which the Altaians incorporated into their new spirituality, the White Faith included many Tibetan Buddhist elements. It was not only material objects such as Buddhist bells, statuettes, and prayer flags but also religious terminology. For example, it is known that each Mongol monastery had an entire set of small satellite shrines called *sume* ; by the same token, a generic word for all kinds of shrines and temples in Mongolia was *khurjie* (Moses 1997, p. 135). The Altaian preachers of the White Faith adopted the exact same words to label their own prayer sites, which they called both *kure* and *sume* (Figures 7 & 8). There were other verbal clones, such as the word *shabi*, which was used in Mongolian monasteries to refer to lama apprentices. In the White Faith, *shabi* came to mean an apprentice to *yarlikchi*, a White Faith preacher. On the whole, at the turn of the 20th century, both missionaries and unbiased secular intellectuals who directly observed the White Faith, frequently described it as Lamaism

and stressed that Altai was undergoing a rapid conversion to Tibetan Buddhism (Figure 9).

Fig. 7. A White Faith prayer altar (*sume*)

A water color by V. Lizukov [1914]. Andrei Anokhin Papers, AMAE, f. 11, op. 1, d. 126.

Fig. 8. Chet Chelpan's personal prayer altar. Note the sacred ribbons (*jaik*), which in Ak-Jang prayers were called *altan-kerel* (golden light); this might be linked to one of the popular Buddhist sutras that in Mongolia was called *Altan Gerel*

A watercolor by V. Lizukov, June 21, 1914. Andrei Anokhin Papers, AMAE, f. 11, op. 1, d. 126.

Fig. 9. Ak-Jang (White Faith) calendar system borrowed from Mongol Buddhism, 1925

Andrei Anokhin Papers, AMAE, f. 11, op. 1, d. 132.

Bolshevik “Liberation Theology” : Oirot/Amursana Prophecy Meets Communism

38 With the advancement of the Bolsheviks into Turkic-Mongol areas, indigenous prophecies became a serious challenge to the gospel of Communism. It is well known that, at least in the early 1920s in an attempt to entrench itself in non-Russian areas, Red Russia successfully met this challenge by assimilating local national aspirations. Taking the feelings of oppressed peoples into consideration became an excellent short-term strategy for the Bolsheviks, who reluctantly reconciled themselves to an idea that the path to social liberation in multinational societies lay through national liberation. In fulfillment of this strategy, the Bolsheviks cajoled and appropriated the millenarian sentiments of the Altaians and Mongols. For example, before being denounced in the 1930s as a bourgeois nationalism and a fifth column of Japanese imperialism, in the1920s, the White Faith was viewed as a national liberation movement (Mamet [1930] 1994). What eased the plans of the Bolsheviks was that their own prophecy, Marxism, contained a strong millenarian element that could easily be customized to fit the prophetic sentiments of preliterate people who encountered dramatic calamities and who looked for social and economic miracles.[5] One of the major theoreticians of millenarian studies anthropologist Anthony Wallace stressed that the message of Marxism, and the communist movement it stirred, played the role of a religious revitalization movement akin to tribal millenarianism, only in a secular form (Wallace 1956).

39 In 1919, in their zeal to speed up Communism’s second coming, the Bolsheviks launched Communist International (Comintern), a Moscow-based organization with branches in various countries. The Mongol-Tibetan Section, a part of the Comintern structure, was assigned to railroad the gospel of Communism in Inner Asia. The section was set up by indigenous fellow travelers of the Bolsheviks (so-called national Bolsheviks) : Elbek-Dorji Rinchino, an ambitious Buryat intellectual who was dreaming about creating a Pan-Mongol socialist state in Inner Asia, and Sergei Borisov, another indigenous intellectual who came from Altai and who eventually became the head of that section. Both men were instrumental in turning Mongolia “Red.” Subsequently, Rinchino became the first Red dictator of Mongolia, whereas Borisov - who in 1920 was admitted into the Bolshevik party - made a career as deputy chief in the Eastern Department of the Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. In a strange twist of fate, Borisov was the son of Stefan Borisov, an indigenous Russian Orthodox missionary, who at first proselytized among his kinfolk and then, after 1917, turned into an ardent Altaian nationalist, participating in building the Karakorum autonomy among his fellow Oirot people. Incidentally, Stefan Borisov was the first to provide the best-detailed description of the White Faith in 1905. Unlike his father, the younger Borisov linked the liberation of indigenous people to the Communist prophecy, and, along with his comrade Rinchino, worked hard to bring Communism to southern Siberia and Mongolia. Moreover, in 1924, dressed as a lama pilgrim, he journeyed to Tibet, trying to woo it to Red Russia’s side.[6]

40 The Mongol-Tibetan Section instructed its agents to be sensitive to the cultures and traditions of Inner Asia. Moreover, the preferred strategy was that “the Mongol-Tibetan section should conduct no direct work there. Let the Mongols do the job” (Montibotdel Sekvostnara 1921, p. 141back). Since social and class sentiments were still dormant in such remote areas as Mongolia, Communism was not an immediate item on the Bolshevik

agenda ; Comintern agents were instructed to play on religion and nationalism. The first task was to hijack national liberation movements in order to help oppressed nationalities win their freedom, to educate them, and to build up their industries. Only then would it be possible to turn the populace toward Communism. Thus, in Mongolia, the goal of the Bolsheviks was at first to assimilate Buddhism's ideas and heroes, and then gradually replace them with Communism as the ideology of the new Mongol nation (Figure 10). Pursuing such stealth strategy, the Red Mongols recast Genghis Khan and other deified historical figures in the spirit of national and social liberation (Kaplonski 1998, p. 45). Hence, the guidelines of the Mongol-Tibetan Section were aimed at "ideologically mastering the national movement of the Mongol popular masses, safeguarding and cleansing it of harmful layers that might shadow its social side" (No author [Minutes of the Meeting of the Mongol-Tibetan Section] 1920, p. 13).

Fig. 10. A Red Mongol commissar with his clerk, 1928. Note the sacred *tanka* in the background with the face of Lenin, which replaced Maitreya and other Buddhist deities in the new Mongol iconography

41 In order to anchor themselves in the indigenous periphery of the former Russian empire, the Bolsheviks pursued a similar strategy. In the southern part of Altai, which was only loosely connected to Russia, their immediate attention was focused on using the Oirot prophecy to carve an autonomous territorial enclave that was to accommodate the ethnic sentiments unleashed by the White Faith movement. Devastated by the atrocities, which were committed against them by Red paramilitary units staffed by Russian settlers craving for indigenous lands, many Altaians were migrating en mass southward to Western Mongolia back to their Oirot "homeland" – an unpleasant event that could compromise the Bolshevik message of national liberation among colonial people of Asia.

42 The major work of promoting and advocating that project was placed on the shoulders of indigenous Altaian Leonid Sary-Sep Konzychakov, an official from the Bolshevik People's Commissariat for Nationalities Affairs (PCNA). Like Borisov, Konzychakov belonged to the national Bolsheviks and similarly came from a family of an indigenous missionary, who,

before 1917, propagated Christianity among his kinfolk. In 1921, he was entrusted with shaping the Oirot autonomy. Knowing that ideas of Communism in their European garb would never work out among his illiterate fellow tribesmen, he immediately suggested that the Bolsheviks play on the idea of the Oirot prophecy. In his memo to Stalin, the then head of PCNA, Konzychakov stressed that among the Oirot people the idea of social and national liberation was closely associated with such images as Oirot and Oirot-khan : "Liberation of the Oirot will happen when a glacier from the Belukha Mountain falls down. That summer, on that day of all days, the glacier shifted. According to a legend, this natural phenomenon marks the liberation and revival of the Oirot state. This is not surprising if one takes into account the independent statehood the natives had in their past. The answer is quite clear here. The population wants to get rid of misfortunes and death, which, according to the popular legend, is only possible through the revival of Oirot." Pointing out that the Altaians attached "prophetic meaning to legends and tales" and comparing native mindsets with messianic aspirations of ancient Hebrews and early Christians, Konzychakov concluded that it would be very unwise to neglect this prophesy : "For us, representatives of the RSFSR,[7] such mindset of the people is quite useful" (Konzychakov 1921, p. 333). The outcome of his efforts was the creation in 1922 of the Oirot Autonomous Province (OAP) within the Mountain Altai, the area that was the stronghold of the White Faith.

43 It was not only the indigenous Bolsheviks, but also several proponents of the White Faith who tried to accommodate their message to the new regime (Figure 11). For example, Argymai Kul'djin – one of the master minds of the Oirot prophecy in Altai who stood behind Chet Chelpan – talked about Lenin as "the Oirot of all oppressed." In his conversation with ethnographer Andrei Danilin, Kul'djin stressed that there was actually no contradiction between the Bolshevik and Oirot prophecies because the expected chief Oirot already manifested himself in the shape of Lenin. Reporter Zinaida Richter similarly observed in the 1920s that "Oirot mystics" associated chief Oirot with the image of Lenin and viewed representatives of the Soviet power as his prophets. Moreover, several Altaian elders came to the headquarters of Ivan Alagyzov, one of the first Bolshevik leaders of OAP, to inquire about his Oirot lineage. The indigenous Bolshevik modestly played down his role and instead repeated the above-mentioned gimmick about Lenin as the Oirot of the oppressed people (Znamenski 2005, p. 50). In the early 1920s, when the Bolsheviks desperately needed to ground themselves among the indigenous masses, they did not mind building up such useful associations.

Fig. 11. Chokhtubai Chiptynov, an Ak-Jang (White Faith) preacher who quit his faith in 1928 to join the Communist party

Andrei Danilin Papers, Archive of Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (AMAE), St. Petersburg, f. 15, op. 1, 14.

44 In Western Mongolia, Comintern and its Red Mongol allies tried to deal in a similar manner with a serious challenge posed by the Amursana prophecy and Ja-Lama separatism. In fact, the influence of the "reincarnation," which had only 300 warriors, grew beyond Western Mongolia – the "lama with a gun" who returned from Russia was now viewed by many nomads as the martyr of the national idea. At first, the Mongol-Tibetan Section had high hopes for Ja-Lama and thought about assimilating "Amursana" into the Bolshevik cause. The plan was "to urgently establish a formal connection with the partisan movement of Western Mongolia by sending to Dambi-Dzhamtsyn [Ja-Lama] a responsible representative of the [Mongol] people's party, who would steer this movement ideologically in a correct direction" (No author [Guidelines for the Mongol-Tibetan Section] 1920, p. 30). The Bolsheviks toyed with the idea of making Ja-Lama a guerrilla commander who could help them finish off the pockets of White resistance. The warlord was even offered the official title of a national leader, Commander of Western Mongol Revolutionary Forces, and sent symbolic gifts : a Russian military cap and two small hand grenades (Khutagt 1982, p. 122). Yet, obsessed with a totalitarian dream of his own, Ja-Lama dismissed the advances of the Bolsheviks.

45 Unable to tame the unfriendly reincarnation, Borisov, Rinchino and their Mongol comrades decided to beat "Amursana" on his own spiritual ground by making up their own reincarnation in order to split Ja-Lama's flock and confuse local nomads. For the role of Red Amursana, the Bolsheviks picked Has Bator, a young Mongol lama and a new convert to the Bolshevik cause, who, after a short training and indoctrination in Irkutsk, was sent to western Mongolia on a "military-political expedition" along with two dozen

Comintern agents and one thousand Red Mongol and Buryat troops. Bolsheviks and their Mongol fellow travelers initiated a sophisticated game of image making to bill Has Bator as the new and better reincarnation. They made him three luxurious yurts decorated inside with antique weapons. Simultaneously, word was spread that the real Amursana had finally come from his northern land. Part of the game was creating an aura of mystery around the newly anointed one. Every day Red Amursana received mysterious packages from somewhere. Several nomadic communities embraced this message and left Ja-Lama for Has Bator (Korostovets 1926, p. 311 ; Boris Shumatsky to Mikhail Kobetskii, April 23, 1921, RASPI, f. 435, op. 154, d. 105, p. 33 ; Shumatsky to Kobetskii, May 20, 1921, Ibid., p. 39back ; Lomakina 2004, p. 263).

46 Colonel V. Y. Sokol'nitski, the chief of staff for Alexander Kaigorodov, one of the runaway White Army war lords who operated in Mongolia between 1920 and 1921, remembered, "In our Kobdo area, the activities of the Reds started at the end of May [1921], when Has-Bator came here accompanied by several Buryat and Red detachments headed by Commissar [Karl] Baikalov. Has-Bator came here from Irkutsk and was showered with great honors. Tuning themselves to the Mongol psyche and sentiments, the Reds very skillfully linked their propaganda to the religious and national expectations of the Mongols and cunningly used an old legend about the Mongol hero Amursana. It was announced that the ancient prophecy was now fulfilled, and the legendary Amursana returned to his homeland" (Lomakina 1993, pp. 134-135). Although the new reincarnation was killed in a skirmish between another band of renegade White forces and the Bolsheviks, the damage was done, and there was enough confusion planted among the nomadic population about Ja-Lama's Amursana credentials.

47 Simultaneously, the Soviet secret police - along with its sister organization in Mongolia called the State Internal Protection (GVO) – worked out an elaborate plan of how to physically eliminate the "lama avenger" without storming his fortified stronghold. In 1923, acting as a religious pilgrim, a GVO agent named Nanzan, along with two other Red "lamas," was able to penetrate Ja-Lama's camp. At one point, while receiving blessings from "Amursana," Nanzan shot him dead. The sudden and bold execution of the "reincarnation," who was considered invincible, so stunned and demoralized his flock that nobody offered any resistance.

Conclusions

48 The major premise of this paper is that, being part of the same cultural area, Altai and Western Mongolia were stirred up by the similar millenarian prophecy approximately at the same time. Drawing on the same folk memory, prophetic expectations in both areas flourished in response to economic and cultural pressures from Russia and China. It is also essential to remember that the millenarian dreams linked to Oirot and Amursana became such a potent force in the above-mentioned areas not so much because of land dispossession (which was more visible in northern Altai and Inner Mongolia) but mostly because of the fear of coming colonization, loss of the nomads' special autonomous status within Russian and Chinese empires, and the subsequent chaos of the civil war. The situation described is a perfect illustration of the "relative deprivation" thesis offered by David Aberle, one of the deans of millenarian studies (Aberle 1962).

49 Rather than being unique, Altaian shepherd Chet Chelpan and Kalmyk expatriate Ja-Lama were just part of a "tribe" of messengers of the Oirot/Amursana prophecy, who wandered

Altai and Western Mongolia between the 1890s and the 1920s, the time of calamities and turmoil for the local nomads. The reason they became so noticeable was that both Chet and Ja-Lama happened to emerge at the right place at the right time : the first did so in Altai, when the Oirot were ready to challenge Russian cultural and economic intrusions, and the second made his mark in Mongolia when local nomads were struggling to liberate themselves from the Chinese. On the surface, their personalities were completely different. A ruthless man with an elementary Buddhist education, Ja-Lama revealed strong charismatic leadership and military skills. As such, he was the total opposite of Chet Chelpan, an illiterate and timid shepherd, who was uncomfortable about his sudden publicity in the Altaian Mountains and who essentially was a marionette in the hands of such assertive preachers of the White Faith as the Kul'djin brothers and Akemchi. What united Ja-Lama and Chet Chelpan was that they drew on the same prophecy and appealed to the same feelings of emerging nationalism in their respective areas. In both Altai and Western Mongolia, the prophecy not only served as a formidable tool of spiritual resistance against Russian and Chinese encroachments, but it also nourished the sense of a wider territorial identity and ethnicity. Transgressing clan borders, it became the cultural and spiritual glue that bound scattered nomadic communities. In this capacity, the Oirot/Amursana prophecy provided a spiritual foundation for various nationalist projects : the abortive 1917-1918 Karakorum autonomy, Ja-Lama separatist fiefdom in Western Mongolia during 1912-1914, 1918-1923, and finally the 1922 Oirot Autonomous Province established under the Bolshevik tutelage. The White Faith, an Altaian ethno-religious movement that merged traditional shamanism with elements of Mongol Buddhism, was part of this cultural and political milieu.

50 It appears that between the 1890s and 1920s the Oirot/Amursana prophecy also became a powerful channel of transmission of Tibetan Buddhism into Altai. Throughout these years, existing anti-Russian cultural sentiments of the Altaians received spiritual feedback from the Mongol Buddhists, their fellow Oirot people, who furnished the northern brethren with rituals and ideas, which those Altaians who were interested could use to challenge both Russian Christianity and traditional shamanism and thus, shape their own indigenous version of Tibetan Buddhism. Not surprisingly, the image of Oirot, the major icon of the Altaian ethno-religious revival, frequently merged with the image of Burkhan (the face of Buddha) ; as one of the White Faith psalms put it, "Oirot-Burkhan, the one who flies between fire and lighting,/Thou are our ruler (khan),/We shall pray to Thee" (Apaiatov 1935, p. 223).[8] At the turn of the 20th century, Altai was clearly undergoing an intensive conversion to Tibetan Buddhism. Consciously or unconsciously Chet Chelpan, the Kul'djin brothers, Akemchi and other preachers of the White Faith were acting as budding Buddhists. If it had not been sealed from the Mongol world by the Soviet regime in the late 1920s, Altai most certainly would have repeated the path that had been taken by the Tuvans and the Buryat, two other Siberian peoples who had earlier been converted to Tibetan Buddhism. It appears that the White Faith was moving toward what potentially could have been called an Altaian version of Tibetan Buddhism – a process that was terminated by the advancement of the powerful Communist prophecy that successfully latched onto the popular millenarian dream and then secularized it into the project of the Oirot Autonomous Province.

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GAAK : Gosudarstvennii arkhiv Altaiskogo kraia [State Archive of the Altai District], Barnaul.

GARF : Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [State Archive of the Russian Federation], Moscow.

RASPI : Rossiiskii Arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoii istorii, [Russian Archive of Social and Political History], Moscow.

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NOTES

1. In fact, one of the White Faith's psalms from southern Altai attributed the same role to both Oirot and Amursana : "Derben Oirot, Thou are our ruler (khan)/Burkhan, Thou are our Guardian,/Amursana, Thou are our ruler (khan),/Golden Oirot is our Burkhan" (Tanashev and Chet Takhtarov 1928, p. 188).
2. As Rebecca Empson reminds to us, prophecies were traditionally an important part of the Mongol cultural area, helping the nomadic populace deal with the uncertainties of life and mentally digest dramatic changes in the time of troubles (Empson 2006).
3. Paying tribute in furs was considered a badge of a special autonomous status of Siberian natives in contrast to Russian peasant population that paid their financial dues in hard money. There was a fear among Altaians that, initiating a reform that was to standardize local administration in the Russian Empire, the government, which now required paying tribute in money, might downgrade the nomads to the status of Russian peasants, who carried more financial obligations than Siberian natives.
4. For the best biography of Ja-Lama in English, see Croner 2010. For an equally comprehensive account of his life story in Russian, consult Lomakina 1993.
5. The first to explore how Red Russia linked its secular prophecy to messianic expectations of the Eastern populace was historian Emanuel Sarkisyanz who in his illuminating and now half-forgotten *Russland and der Messianismus des Orients* (Sarkisyanz 1955) has discussed the attempts of the early Bolsheviks and their indigenous allies in Mongol cultural area to plug into such popular local prophecies as Shambhala, Geser, Oirot, and Amursana.
6. For more on the Bolshevik ventures in Tibet, see Andreev 2003 and Znamenski 2011, pp. 142-153.
7. Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the name the Bolsheviks attached to their country before it constituted itself as the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).
8. Note also a line from another White Faith psalm that I have already quoted earlier in this article : "Golden Oirot is our Burkhan" (Tanashev & Chet Takhtarov 1928, p. 188).

ABSTRACTS

The paper discusses and compares two millenarian movements that sprang up in Altai (Burkhanism or the Ak-Jang [the White/Pure Faith], 1904) and in Western Mongolia (Ja-Lama fiefdom, 1911) in response to Russian (Altai) and Chinese (Mongolia) economic/cultural advances on nomadic societies. Earlier scholarship has been focused on the Altaian White Faith, stressing its unique nature and downplaying its links with the Ja-Lama movement and with Mongol/Buddhist tradition in general. In contrast, this paper suggests that preachers of the White Faith, who propagated the coming of the legendary redeemer named Oirot, and warlord Ja-Lama, who declared himself the reincarnation of Oirot prince Amursana, capitalized on the same Oirot/Amursana prophecy shared by the populations in both areas. It is also argued that in the early 20 th century the White Faith was gradually transforming into what could have become an Altaian version of Tibetan Buddhism – a process that was terminated by the advance of the powerful Communist prophecy that hijacked and then secularized the Oirot and Amursana legends.

Cet article discute et compare deux mouvements millénaristes qui se sont étendus en Altaï (le bourkhanisme ou « Foi blanche », 1904) et en Mongolie occidentale (fief de Ja-Lama, 1911) en réponse aux pénétrations économiques et culturelles des Russes (Altaï) et des Chinois (Mongolie) dans ces sociétés nomades. Les études précédentes ont mis l'accent sur la « Foi blanche » altaïenne, insistant sur son caractère exceptionnel et minimisant ses rapports avec le mouvement de Ja-Lama et avec le monde Mongol et bouddhiste en général. Par contraste, cet article soutient que les prêcheurs de la Foi blanche qui ont annoncé la venue du sauveur légendaire Ojrot et le chef de guerre Ja-Lama qui se déclara lui-même réincarnation du prince Oïrat Amursana capitalisent sur la prophétie d'Oïrot/Amyrsana qui circulait parmi les populations des deux régions. L'article montre également qu'au début du XX^e^ siècle, la Foi blanche se transforma graduellement en ce qui aurait pu devenir une version altaïenne du bouddhisme tibétain, avant que l'avancée de la puissante prophétie communiste ne vienne détourner et séculariser les légendes d'Ojrot et d'Amursana.

INDEX

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